

**THE DONKEY DIED, THE SNAKE (ALMOST) SURVIVED  
KUWAITI FOLKTALES, WHAT HAPPENED TO HEMARAT AL GHAYLA AND NESÓP?**

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**Abstract**

The current paper is based on the conception that Kuwaiti people are forgetting their stories and it is largely down to the fact that the new generation of Kuwait hardly remember the fictional figures of the *Tantal*, *Al Seolu*, *Sehaila Um Al-Khalajeen*, *Um Al-Sa'af Wa-Alleef*, *Al-Duaidea*, *Bu Darya*, which is mainly due to historical and social background. The article intends to dwell on these types of stories and their meaning, focusing on the moral context, as well.

**Keywords:** Kuwaiti folktales, anecdotes, moral issues

**Diszciplina:** Cultural Anthropology

**Absztrakt**

A SZAMÁR HALOTT, A KÍGYÓ (MAJDNEM) TÚLÉLTE. KUVAITI NÉPMESÉK, HOVA LETT HEMARAT AL GHAYLA ÉS NESÓP?

A tanulmány kuvaiti népmesék narratív elemzésével foglalkozik. A tartalomelemzés egyik legfőbb célja, hogy az elemzés tárgyát képező irodalmi művek elemzésén keresztül megfektse az adott éra erkölcsi kontextusát.

**Kulcsszavak:** Kuvaiti népmesék, anekdoták, erkölcsi kérdések

**Diszciplina:** Kulturális antropológia

Striking recognition it is, but Kuwaiti people are forgetting their stories; Hemarat Al Gayla (afternoon's donkey) was not only forgotten, but it is apparently dying. The new generation (as the locals call it today) of Kuwait hardly remember the fictional, or in other words fantastic figures of the Tantal, Al Seolu, Sehaila Um Al-Khalajeen, Um Al-Sa'afWa-Alleef, Al-Duaidea, Bu Darya (more: Németh, 2022), due to various historical and societal aspects that the present article does not discuss. Some stories however survived on the fading pages of old books that lay on the back shelves of libraries. Dusting them, a fascinating world is revealed to the reader, who is eager enough to read through the descriptions written by travelers. One of these works is *The Arab of the Desert - A Glimpse Into Badawin Life in Kuwait and Sau'di Arabia* (1949), authored by H.R.P. Dickson.

This breathtakingly lengthy work describes the material culture, customs, and traditions of the Arabs, living in the Arabian peninsula in absolute detail, and with (for a political agent at least) surprising ethnographic accuracy. The 666 pages book covers all subjects from the traditional ways of deciphering the deeper meaning of dreams to the incredible tales that used to circulate in the area.

The author, Dickson Harold Richard Patrick (1881-1959), was in charge of the Political Agency in Bahrain from 6 November 1919 to 28 November 1920 and worked in Kuwait from 1929 to ca 1936, during which time he amassed information for his colossal book on *'The Arab of the Desert: A Glimpse into Badawin life in Kuwait and Sau'di Arabia'* (Dickson, 1949), which remains one of the most authoritative works on the subject. His second book was entitled *'Kuwait and her neighbours'* (Dickson, 1956). To explain his personal connection to the Arab of the desert, in

the foreword he writes: "I was born in Beyrout, Syria, in 1881, and as a small child was taken to Damascus, where my mother's milk failed early. It so happened that Shaikh Mijwal of the Mazrab section of the Sba'a, the well-known sub-tribe of the great 'Anizah group was in Damascus at the time, and gallantly stepping into the breach, he volunteered to secure for me a wet nurse, or foster mother from among his tribes-women. A Bada-wiyah girl was duly produced, and according to my mother's testimony, I drank her milk for several weeks. This in the eyes of the Badawin entitles me to a certain "blood affinity" with the 'Anizah, for to drink the woman's milk in the desert is to become a child of the foster mother. This fact has been of assistance to me in my dealings with the Badawin, of the high desert and around Kuwait."

The political nature of such decisions cannot be overlooked. The author was the child of a diplomat delegated to the Middle East in a historically definitive period of time. Sheikh Mubarak Al Sabah signed the Anglo-Kuwaiti Agreement (1899) with the British government, making Kuwait a British protectorate until 1961. This gave Britain exclusive access and trade with Kuwait while denying Ottoman provinces to the north a port on the Persian Gulf (Casey, 2007).

In other words, in addition to the Islamic imperatives to seek peace and be charitable, it was also in the best interest of the ruling tribes to maintain a close and promising relationship with British diplomats. Welcoming a British as the child of the tribe has secured accords with the allies. Not surprisingly, Dickson maintained a very deep connection to the Arabs, especially the Badawin culture, however, these connections were not without limitations. Close ties with the ruling tribes and the Badawins also meant having limited access and/or interest in the other tribes in Kuwait, therefore his work is although one of the most thorough

ethnographic descriptions of Kuwait of its age, it does not necessitate that it is exhaustive to all tribes of the area in the mentioned era.

Besides, assisting a British diplomat's family in need of help was proven to be one of the most fruitful and smooth diplomatic actions of their age in Kuwait, which provided a significant opportunity for the author to build relationships, observe and describe the culture, and last but not least, pursue his political mission. He was not only a political agent but an important factor in the preservation and presentation of the Kuwaiti culture and traditional lifestyle. The Colonel spent a formidable amount of time camping in the Kuwaiti wilderness with his family during his missions in Kuwait. This allowed him to pen his most important work, which was heavily illustrated by his wife, Violet Dickson, the author of *Forty years in Kuwait*.

Although he transcribed the stories heard from different tribesmen in Kuwait, the storytellers were of different nationalities, and the narrated tales took place in different cities in today's Iraq (Basraa) and Kuwait besides various areas of Saudi Arabia. From the beginning of Kuwait's history though, the people of Iran, Saudi-Arabia, Iraq, and even Africa have mingled and settled in the territory (under the Ottoman Empire) that is called Kuwait today. Taking a look at the genetic makeup of the people of Kuwait, the research shows the following;

„The Population of Kuwait comprises early settlers that include tribes from Arabian and Persian countries, and nomadic Bedouins of the desert. By way of analysing genome-wide genotypes from 273 Kuwaiti natives, we recently demonstrated three distinct genetic subgroups in Kuwaiti population: Kuwait P (KWP) of Persian ancestry; Kuwait S (KWS) of “city-dwelling” Saudi Arabian tribe ancestry, and Kuwait B (KWB) that includes most of the “tent-dwelling” Bedouin participants (recruited to provide samples for genotyping). The

KWB is distinguished from the other two groups by a characteristic presence of 17% African ancestry (ranging from 11.7% to 39.4%); Arabian ancestry is seen more in the Saudi Arabian tribe ancestry subgroup (at 69%) than in the Bedouin group (at 40%). [...] The observed genetic compositions in the Bedouin substructure of Kuwaiti population: European (French\_Basque)–11%; Arab (Negev Bedouin)–45.0%; sub-Saharan African (Biaka\_Pygmy)–17.0%; and West Asia (Druze, Brahui)–25%” (John et al., 2014)

Although he transcribed the stories heard from different tribesmen in Kuwait, the storytellers were of different nationalities, and the narrated tales took place in different cities in today's Iraq (Basraa) and Kuwait besides various areas of Saudi Arabia. From the beginning of Kuwait's history though, the people of Iran, Saudi-Arabia, Iraq, and even Africa have mingled, and settled in the territory (under the Ottoman Empire) that is called Kuwait today (John et al., 2014).

Taking into account the connection and interference of peoples, it is also reasonable to assume that they would share the same typology and “genotype” of stories; in other words, different variations of the same narrations will be told and recorded throughout Kuwait and her neighbours, and Kuwait hasn't necessarily developed a subgroup of stories that is particular only to the local groups within the wider area. More accurately, the same genotype of South Arabian, East-and North-African, Iranian, and Badawin (“desert-dwelling”) variations will blend in the discussed space. Therefore, it is righteous to consider reciting those tales and stories that are in use by the local community and unweave the context, that is used among their narrators and agents, the local community members, regardless of their origins.

Among the stories transcribed in the mentioned book, four are dedicated specifically to Kuwait, one doesn't declare the origin or the local; Shaikh Mu-barak of Kuwait and the amorous fidawi, Captain

Shakespear and the Kuwait Boatman, are anecdotes, true stories, and stories of Kuwaiti history. The other two, Nesóp and the Snake, and Ras al Dhíb are animal fables, and The Hattáb (wood-cutter) and the Khaznah (treasure) is a complex narrative, most probably the combination of multiple stories. Dwelling through Kuwaiti stories, the narrations of the interviewees seem to come to life. All the interviewed members of the community have mentioned two critical characteristics of the tales they used to hear (but were not able to recite upon inquiry). First, the narratives always hold a moral, therefore narration consistently implies an educational purpose, which is clearly an Islamic principle, consensual among Islamic scholars. Second, in the great majority of cases, these are either anecdotes of real people, whose real-life actions either became famous (the protagonist achieves a higher rank throughout the conflict) or served some moral purpose to the local community. This article aims to dwell on these stories and their meaning, deciphering their moral context.

**Shaikh Mubarak of Kuwait and the Amorous *Fidawi*** (a personal bodyguard, and/or a servant closest to the ruler) (A true story)

This story is about a seemingly honest servant (the personal bodyguard) to Shaikh Mubarak. As of the written narration of H.R.P. Dickson, a servant was doing his job greatly, and although the shaikh knew all about his mistakes, he forgave him because of his good work on the other hand. The servant had one weakness though, and it was women. One day, he started a fatal affair with one of his neighbour's wives. The affair did not remain unnoticed or a secret, as upon the gossip and warning of the neighbours, the husband caught them "*flagrante delicto*" with the help of three other male witnesses. Being taken before Shaikh Mubarak, the ruler reasoned with the servant about his decision that was made in the favour of the

cheated husband when he asked for justice. The shaikh explained thoroughly that until this mistake, he had forgiven all the other faults of his servant, as he was doing such a great service that it outweighed the bad, he had done. However, adultery that is actually proven, is such a great sin, that it cannot be overlooked, and he had the *fidawi* executed (beheaded).

As for Islam, the punishment for adultery is death by stoning and for fornication it is flogging, which are commonly referred to under the same term, *zinā* (زِنَا); „Receive teaching from me, receive teaching from me. Allah has ordained a way for those women. When an unmarried male commits adultery with an unmarried female, they should receive one hundred lashes and banishment for one year. And in case of married male committing adultery with a married female, they shall receive one hundred lashes and be stoned to death.” (Hadith, *Kitab Al-Hudud*, 17:4191).

The act has to be proven however by 4 male witnesses (they have to catch the couple "in the act", only after that the crime is considered proven); „And those who accuse chaste women then do not bring four witnesses, flog them, (giving) eighty stripes, and do not admit any evidence from them ever; and these it is that are the transgressors. Except those who repent after this and act aright, for surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.” (Qur'an, Sura 24 (An-Nur), ayat 4–5)

This tale is the sheer example of what Muslims repeat in their daily lives, explaining the rules of their religion to non-muslims; there are rules, and all human beings are fallible, we all do make mistakes, and can repent to God, recant our sins, however, there is a line that can never be crossed under any circumstances. Adultery, and/or fornication is a deadly sin under Islamic laws, so the narrative is also a warning to everyone that not even those of the highest social status or the strongest *wasta* (a person who liaises during conflicts or has a great influence over decisions due to their status or social network), working under the ruler can get away with violating the law of God,

especially not on a consistent basis. Forgiveness is practised in many different cases, as many are making mistakes while leading a fundamentally good life that serves the community, but there are sins that will always outweigh the good deeds and violate the Deen (The way of life, the religion, the creed, the duty to God) of a Muslim. The shaikh on the other hand could not have denied the wish of the poor husband who brought the sinners in front of him to have justice served. Only the fate of the *fidawi* is narrated in the story, the consequences to the wife remain unknown, as the moral focus, and the conflict of this instance, is not the adultery alone, but the adultery committed by someone of a high social rank and of influence within the local community, close to the ruler himself. Thus, the fate of the cheating woman is irrelevant from the moral point of view in this anecdote, because the narrator is focusing on the social status of the *fidawi*, and the punishment received to the contrary of being the servant of the strongest imaginable *wasta*. To further explain, “*Wasta* may mean either mediation or intercession. It denotes the person who mediates/intercedes, as well as the act of mediation/intercession.

Intermediary *wasta* endeavours to resolve interpersonal and inter-group conflict. A *jaha* (*wajaha*’, a mediation group of notable emissaries sent by the perpetrator’s family to the victim’s family) acts to inhibit revenge from being taken following an incident involving personal injury. The *jaha* seeks a truce between the parties, with the hope of an eventual agreement to resolve the conflict. “*Wasta* as mediation has a long and honourable history. In a tribal setting, *wasta* mediation binds families and communities for peace and well-being in a hostile environment. This face of *wasta* benefits society as a whole, as well as the parties involved. Intercessory *wasta* involves a protagonist intervening on behalf of a client to obtain an advantage for the client - a job, a government document, a tax reduction, and admission to a prestigious university. [...] When the seekers for a benefit are many and the opportunities are few, only

*aspirants with the strongest wastas are successful.*” (Cunningham and Sarayra, 1994, 29.)

In other words, *wasta* is a person of influence or the use of influence to help the positive outcome of either a conflict or an aspiration.

What the audience would witness through this conflict, is the question of the social role of these two kinds of *wastas* and their limitations. The role of the interceding *wasta* has been a long-term matter of interest in Kuwaiti, and in general Arab society, and the subject of many nationwide discussions, as intercession is considered the means of corruption, condemned by Islamic scholars. Therefore, the recited anecdote is not only a generic moral for the public, but it also intends to paint Shaikh Mubarak as a great mediatory *wasta* who abides by Islamic law and is a role model, while he is also an example of an intercessory *wasta*.

#### **Captain Shakespeare and the Boatman**

The next example also presents the reader with insights to the interpretation of the ‘*wasta* phenomenon’, and the author himself notes in his introduction that he is unable to vouch for the accuracy of the story.

Captain Shakespeare was having many conflicts with the then-ruler Mubarak, due to both of them feeling not being treated with the distinguished honour they claimed based on their position and status. Captain Shakespeare was a political agent and a remarkable man, while Mubarak the leader of tribes, and aspiring then-ruler of Kuwait were demanding honour for themselves, which led to a break in the relationship. One day, a struggle started on Shakespeare’s boat for it being used as a bridge, so in his frustration, the Captain threw a poor Kuwaiti in the water, forgetting that a five-pronged Arab anchor was hanging on the side, which the Kuwaiti landed on, dying immediately. Desperate out of guilt, remorse, and fear, Shakespeare accepts the offer of the Director of

Customs (the narrator of the story), to go before Shaikh Mubarak, confess to everything, and offer blood money (ransom) to the family as per tradition, and to show humbleness and regret to the leader. The Shaikh, seeing the intense regret and hearing the humble apologies and the offer of blood money, unexpectedly says: „*My son, - said he - , if the slaying of one rogue of the many rogues that are my subject brings about such desirable results as to make you come to me and beg forgiveness in humbleness and contriteness of heart, why then, go and slay one of my men every day of your life. For were we not at daggers drawn yesterday, and has not this incident healed our wounds today. May you slay a rogue every day, so long as it brings us together like this.*” (Dickson, 1949, 313-314.)

From that day the two men have become inseparable, and peace was restored by paying the blood money to the victim's family. The Islamic purpose of the blood money is to “reimburse” the family for their loss. One type of killing is intentional murder, the other is unintentional.

In case a murderer kills their victim unintentionally as the Captain did, there is an option for paying their dues by blood money instead of their lives as a retaliation. The system of blood money plays an incredible role in the psychology of the victims, and in justice to be served, and it is based on Talion, a principle developed in early Babylonian law, that criminals should receive as punishment precisely those injuries and damages they had inflicted upon their victims.

Granting the victims the power to retaliate against the death of their loved ones in case of intentional killings, helps the process of healing and grief and intends to resume balance. For the unintentional killings on the other hand, whereas remorse and willingness are shown, blood money can be paid, which on one hand is a type of ransom for the murderer's life, from the other hand, especially if the victim is a man, is supposed to replace the income that the victim is not able to provide to the family anymore.

However, the decision of the victim's family whether to forgive the murderer is only one aspect of the outcome, as the judge of the community still can order the penalty, and the family has the exclusive right to reject the ransom and ask for the life of the perpetrator instead of money. For instance, the victim's family can decide to accept the ransom, forgive the perpetrator, whilst the judge will order them to pay the ransom, and put the murderer in jail or even execute them.

The same may happen the other way around as well. In modern Kuwaiti law, the victim or the family is offered the choice of forgiveness, which nils a share of their punishment, however, the mandatory sanction will still remain in force regardless of the decision of the victim and/or their family.

Since Captain Shakespeare did not intend to kill the poor ‘rogue’, the director of customs advised him to offer blood money and show regret, which in this case has been proven to be a feasible solution for the family of the deceased, and a sensible behaviour in the eyes of the Shaikh, who has decided not to further punish the political agent, instead used this very incident to turn their relationship around and pledge him, which once again was proven to be a sensible diplomatic decision. “*And whoever is killed wrongfully (Mazlooman intentionally with hostility and oppression and not by mistake), We have given his heir the authority [to demand Qisaas, Law of Equality in punishment or to forgive, or to take Diyah (blood money)]. But let him not exceed limits in the matter of taking life (i.e. he should not kill except the killer)*” (*al-Isra' 17:33*)

From a comparative, literary aspect, however, the narration corresponds more to the typology of legends than anything else. The story is most probably absolutely fictional, as until now, no traces of the said incidents were found in relevant resources, however, the characters were real historical personas who interacted in real life at the same age and geographical area at a time.

Shaikh Mubarak (1837 – 28 November 1915) was the seventh ruler of the Sheikdom of Kuwait, and the seventh ruler of the Al Sabah Dynasty, who stabilised the continuity of the ascension to the throne within the Sabah family. He signed the previously mentioned Anglo-Kuwaiti treaty in 1899 with the British.

Captain William Henry Irvine Shakespeare (29 October 1878 – 24 January 1915), was a British civil servant and explorer who mapped uncharted areas of Northern Arabia and made the first official British contact with Ibn Sa'ud, future king of Saudi Arabia. He was the military adviser to Ibn Sa'ud from 1910 to 1915 when he was shot and killed in the Battle of Jarrab by Ibn Shraim. Ibn Saud mentioned Captain Shakespeare as the greatest European he has ever met. They fought side by side in 1915, when the Captain died in battle at the age of 36. He received the name "Shakespeare of Arabia" and was buried in Kuwait.

In 1909, Shakespeare moved to Kuwait as Political Agent. In alliance with Sir Percy Cox, he fought a solitary battle during and before WWI. (when he was Political Agent in Kuwait) to gain protection for Ibn Saud, whom he considered the only desert leader able to gain the alliance of the tribes. When war came Shakespeare was sent back to Arabia to bring the tribes over to Britain's side, but, at 36, he was killed at Ibn Saud's side in battle against the pro-Turkish Ibn Rashid of Hail. (Captain William Henry Shakespeare, A Portrait by H V F Winstone, 1976)

The reader might be taken aback by the greatness of the past. The struggles of long-dead heroes who shaped our history through their day-to-day decisions, for this instance, in an age when the fate of countries and their people depended on those decisions. Shaikh Mubarak, Ibn Saud, Captain Shakespeare, H.R.P. Dickson, were not only living in the same era when the Ottomans and the West were struggling for political and economic leverage over the Middle East preceding the First World

War, but they were also effective and operating actors of their age, let alone assumably interacting with one another.

They have taken voluminous actions which shaped not only the political bearings of their own age but defined diplomatic relations and geopolitics for the long term. No surprise thus that these characters and figures appear as heroes and extraordinary people not only through the everyday anecdotes of the common folks but also in contemporary descriptions of their peers. The recited narrations are not only invaluable additions to understanding micro-history but they also inevitably resemble the nascency of legends about King Mátyás, King Arthur, the modern legendary depictions of Ragnar Lothbrok and other Norse Sagas, or even Robin Hood.

In 1912, when this story allegedly took place, the Arab cause was already at the forefront of interest in Saudi Arabia with the support of Ibn Sa'ud, whilst the Pan-Turkic Nationalist agenda was on the rise in Turkey, weakening its leverage over Arabic territories under its control. In this scene, enter the British and their political agents, who support the Arab cause, and are willing to extend their leverage and support over Saud-Arabia, and the area of modern-day Kuwait against Turkish pursuits, limiting Othman control over West Asia and Arabia.

Rolling up the threads to understand the deeper content of this story, two main characters appear in the story in a power struggle. One, is the person in power, leading his people, and the other one is a guest in the eye of the host. The British agent is an agent, helping the Kuwaitis reach their common goals with the British. The narration mentioned that they are both claiming not to be treated with the expected honour. The shaikh only feels that the agent is paying the necessary respect to him when the Captain is begging for forgiveness, cries, and exhibits behaviours of regret and shame. In Arabic countries, being humble and exhibiting "shame,"

hasham, can paradoxically demonstrate pride and honour, which explains why the captain's behavior triggers such an extraordinary reaction from the shaikh who says without hesitation, that if the price of the captain's respect (who here represents the allies, the British) is to kill a servant every day, he will do that. This emphasises on the relevance the shaikh attributes to being treated in an honourable manner, and being honoured and not overpowered by a British political agent. In the incident where the Captain made a mistake that could have easily cost his life, the Shaikh, later on, the ruler of Kuwait - is in a power position that helps him turn the situation around, and turn the power dynamics on his side, showing mercy and generosity. The reaction may be shocking to many, however, the author of this article hypothesised that this narration is more of a grandiose metaphor that is meant to express the importance of bilateral relations and their respectful nature than a true story. Honour and respect mean a lot to Arab peoples, and it is represented in all levels and areas of their lives from their greetings, through their official written communications and business priorities. This anecdote is a flamboyant image that depicts the obligations and needs for respect between two allied actors of history.

### Nesóp and the Snake

*„Told me by Amsba, wife of Salim al Muzaiyin, whilst in a camp at Arafjan on 1st April, 1933. It is mentioned here because of the resemblance it bears to one of Aesop's fables. The name Nesóp is significant.”* (Dickson, 1949, 326.)

This animal fable is indeed showing many similarities to those of Aesop's (The farmer and the snake, The porcupine and the snake), this particular version has a very contrasting outcome.

One day Nesóp finds a snake frozen stiff on the ground, and he picks, it up and warms it up out of kindness. However, the snake does not want to leave his chest even after warming up. Nesóp turns

to the fox, Al Husni in desperation. The fox agrees to help, and when Nesóp appears with the snake, he tells the animal to come out of Nesóp's shirt and face him so that he can see the both of them. The snake follows through, and after listening to the request for Nesóp to leave, he proceeds to reason that he would not like to abandon a comfortable home; he has no reason to abide by the claim. Seeing there is no other solution, Nesóp beats the snake to death, which is a very different ending from what we have seen in both Aesop tales brought here as examples, as in both cases, the ones that welcome the snake die or get driven out of their own home. This Arab example is serving a different conclusion, showing the reader that however goodwill can put one in trouble, there is still a way out if the course of actions is changed, and one is not blinded by goodwill anymore. The fable here is not only the fable of goodwill and tricksters. This fable is about favours (and wasta), which is a commonly understood language through many local communities. If someone does a favour to anyone in the Arab world, it is advised and expected to be paid back in a similar way. *“Whoever has a favour done for him should repay it. If he cannot find anything he can use to repay it, he should praise the one who did it. When he praises him, he thanks him. If he is silent, he is ungrateful to him.”*; *“Whoever is treated well, let him repay them. If he cannot find repayment, let him praise them for that is thanking them.”* (al-Bukhari, 2006, Al-Adab Al-Mufrad, Book 10, Hadith 215.)

As it is Islamically important to show compassion, and kindness to others, remembering those who helped us, and helping them back is equally important, however, reminding them of the favour they received is not acceptable. Nesóp is stuck with the ungrateful snake's past kindness, and the snake is threatening to bite him. In his desperation, Nesóp turns to the fox, Husni, who agrees to help him out, so Nesóp offers him a rich reward in return for that, so Husni is not helping him out without the promise of the reward. In this case, the

fox is an intermediary *wasta*, who is trying to reach an agreement between the two parties without any success alone. The value of his action lies not in his mediation, but in his smart ways of tricking the snake into leaving the man's chest even for a short time, which is more than enough for Nesóp to take action and resolve the situation by himself, which is destroying the intruder, not giving it a chance to get back into his shirt. We do not know how Nesóp is paying back Al Husni for his kindness, but what is evident in the fable, is the snake's character. *Abu Tha'labah reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "The jinn have three forms: one form like dogs and snakes, one form flies through the air, and one form comes and goes."* (Hibbān, Ibn, Sahih Ibn Hibban, Hadith 6156)

In other words, the Jinns can take on different shapes, such as snakes. The Jinns are able to influence our senses, thinking, and decisions, they are able to avert us from God. They are, by default, invisible, but may take on different shapes. In this plot, the snake, therefore, is not only a dangerous animal that anyone who knows the desert is trying to avoid but also the archetype of evil, of danger. Blinded by goodwill, anyone may embrace evil temporarily, but there is a way out, even if the threat is so close to the heart. In classical Arabic and Persian literature, the fox is a symbol of craftiness and deceit as well as cowardice, and it often appears in different fables from the Middle East, from India to Greece. Not a surprise, therefore, that he appears as a crafty mediator who helps Nesóp to get a chance to get rid of the snake. It often happens in real life as well, that as long as community members are not able to solve a conflict, one of them, or both of them will turn to a mediator, a respected, and valued member of the society, who may advise them and offer alternate solutions, so that peace within the community may be maintained.

It may be a question, of why Nesóphad killed the snake. From an allegorical aspect, the snake is an

evil entity that used the man's goodwill to trick him, and now threatens his life every day, being adamant on stay, which will inevitably destroy the protagonist's life. There is no better way to get rid of evil, than destroying it. From a more pragmatic point of view, it is not forbidden by Islam to kill and slaughter animals for the purpose of food or if they pose a threat to people. Islam forbids only the senseless killing of animals for entertainment, sport, etc. In this case, the snake is the archetype of evil that is a threat to Nesóp and the community.

### **Ras al Dhíb: A Story with Moral**

One day the lion (of the forest) is about to have a feast of its prey and invites the wolf and the fox. He asks them though how they would share the food. First, the wolf answers, giving his advice to the lion, on how the meat should be divided. The king of animals immediately dismembers the wolf, then turns to the fox for answers. The fox, being a timid and clever animal, answered that everything is the lion's property, everything is his. The lion, being satisfied with the reply, asks the fox where he gained his wisdom. To this, the fox points at the separated head of the wolf, and instead of waiting for further reactions, he runs off and disappears into the bushes.

This is a very simple narration of power dynamics, with an elementary explanation; there isn't a benefit in this world that is worth opposing, insulting or challenging power. Power is there to be abode by, and it is best to avoid it as long as one is willing to live. As opposed to the title, this narration is much more of a warning. Both lions and wolves might be representing ferocity in Islam. Lions are used as epithets before the names of heroes; the 'lion of God'. Turkish people often use 'my lion' instead of the name of the person, however, this article is not inclined to decipher Ottoman influence (cultural and linguistic) on the area in detail, even though it is fascinating contemporary

research. In Islamic (and other) arts, lions represent power and courage, and it's the attribute of rulers and warriors. The lion in this setting is the absolute owner of power. Very few resources mention wolves or offer any explanation of what they may symbolise. It may be a sufficient explanation, that in the desert, wolves usually represent a great and unnecessary risk or danger. It is better to avoid them, as one would wild dogs. The lion offers a feast to the wolf and the fox, not to provide, but to assess the response of the guests (as the riddles that the poor woodcutter has to solve, serve the purpose of assessing his capabilities and deciding if he is a cheater who represents a risk to authority).

The wolf is easily fooled by the question when the lion is wondering how he would divide the food between the three of them. Although the wolf is giving a seemingly humble answer, willing to give the best parts to the lion and share the rest between him and the fox, the lion still decides to kill him, and only the approval of the fox's answer (Everything is for the Lion) reveals why. Even though the wolf was asked a question, it was not a riddle of portions, it was the riddle of absolute submission. The wolf failed to submit to absolute authority when he gave his own opinion on what the lion should do, so the lion immediately destroyed him, perceiving the wolf as a threat, not a loyal follower. The lion did not expect an opinion or advice, the lion was expecting signs of unconditional submission, as it could be observed in the case of Captain Shakespeare. The fox is wiser, and fearing for his life, he is giving a wiser answer and submits to power. Eastern societies are generally considered masculine, hierarchical societal structures, where those on top of the hierarchy are rarely questioned, as opposed to for example the western cultures, where questioning power and authority is in general encouraged and accepted. In Arabic societies, questioning authority is usually considered a problematic behaviour that is discouraged by fellow members of the community.

Authority is usually paid due respect and loyalty, and its importance in local communities shall not be overlooked.

### **The Hattáb (woodcutter) and the Khaznah (treasure)**

One day a poor woodcutter heard an imam preaching that if only a man had sufficient faith, he need do nothing, as all things will come to him. "*God will provide*", the woodcutter said, and against his wife's will and complaining, he stopped doing everything, waiting for God to provide him. One day two merchants going on a hunting expedition borrowed the woodcutter's donkey, and they paid good money for it. Before returning from their expedition, they stopped by a city and found a box full of treasures. Both of them started plotting against the other to put their hands on the money, but due to a fatal coincidence, they both managed to kill the other and they both died, so the donkey walked home with the treasure on its back. The woodcutter was very happy and understood that God indeed provides. The family got wealthy, and bought farms and animals, but lived modestly.

All went well, until the villagers started to talk, and the news of the woodcutter becoming wealthy reached the ears of the king, who naturally became curious, so he called the poor man for questioning. The woodcutter gave him the simple answer he knew, that he trusted God, so God provided, but the king did not want to believe this explanation, so he wanted to test the woodcutter. He gave him three riddles to answer by the next day, which he did with the help of his daughter, who appeared to be the "most clever of women". The answers were right, still, the king did not trust the man, so he decided to give him one more test, which the poor woodcutter completed again with the help of his daughter. However, the king was convinced that someone helped the woodcutter, and promised to let him go if he told the truth. The woodcutter

confessed everything, and the king, in his amusement, immediately asked for the daughter's hand in marriage. They got married, but the king decided to further test the daughter and gave her impossible tasks which she had to complete within a year, while he went on a hunting expedition. The girl completed the task using a clever disguise which fooled even the king himself. As a result, the king decided that the woman was worthy after all to be his queen and advisor.

What appears at first sight, is that this story is the longest of all that is narrated in Dickson's book. However, this was narrated to him as one plot, these are at least 3 separate plots of the same, clever-girl story types, and one about faith, where the protagonist reaches a higher social status through his actions (in this case inaction). In this case, the daughter does not solve only one riddle, she solves riddle after riddle, because the king refuses to believe that her father was able to solve such complicated questions, but finally, when the last puzzle is solved, the woodcutter tells the truth about everything, the king is inclined to marry the girl, which leads the reader to the next plot, that in itself can be an individual story.

As the king does not trust his new wife, he decides to leave on a hunting expedition even before consummating the marriage, leaving his newly-wed wife behind as a virgin. She is pleading with the king in vain, he not only leaves her behind but gives her a seemingly impossible task that can be solved only by means of trickery or miracle. „*Good wife, I leave my favourite mare with you. She has never had a horse put to her. Myself I shall take my stallion Al Krushan with me, but I have to ask for you to carry out in my absence. On my return I shall expect to see that my mare, Al Hamdani has had a foal by my stallion, Al Krushan, and I shall further expect you to have a child ready for me to see, whose father I shall be.*” (Dickson, 1949, 321.) and with that, the king leaves his wife to an eunuch. The young wife decides to trick her husband, and persuades her guard to buy her a

shaikh's clothing, as she wants to go after her husband, which in itself is an extraordinary decision. She was allowed to secretly leave the palace, on the condition that she returns in three weeks. She found the camp of the king, and disguised herself as a young shaikh, sending the message to the king that “he” wanted to pay him “his” respects. Her disguise was so clever, that the king was utterly convinced and deceived, and the young “shaikh” was so sympathetic to him, that he asked if the “shaikh” had any sisters he could marry. “He” answered that he indeed had a “twin sister” that could marry the king for a couple of days, but only secretly, as she was promised to a cousin.

It was also one of the conditions, that the sister must arrive and leave in complete disguise and secrecy. The king agreed, and the temporary marriage was arranged, the bride was covered in a burqa. After four days of “bliss”, the bride left, and the young shaikh returned. The king asked “him” how he could reward the shaikh for such a favour. He only asked to have “his” mare to be covered by Al Krushan, the king's black stallion and rejected all the money that was offered, as “he” already managed to steal the king's signet ring from his finger.

The wife of the king returned home and bore a child, the mare did too. The news was delivered to the king upon his return, who tried to strike his wife in blind rage not understanding what happened, as he thought he left his new wife with an impossible task. He questioned the woman, who asked him in return if he had done anything unfaithful or incorrect while he was away and showed him the signet ring.

The king was begging her to tell the truth, and after hearing it all, he approved that his wife is indeed worthy of the title of a queen. Looking at the entire plot, it is the story of changing social status, by faith and merits. From a structural and analytic viewpoint, the first section is the narrative of faith that is richly rewarding. It does not matter

what one's social status is, as long as they trust God, one will be led to their fate, and even though the sequence of events may seem like a coincidence, it is all the result of the trust in God. This first part of the story intends to establish the moral fundamentals of the characters. The man, who is the main character of the plot, is a God-fearing husband who would love to reach a higher financial status but does not have the tools and the means to do that.

When receiving the advice of the imam, a holy man, he does not let anyone divert him from his plan, not even his wife, who will constantly nag him to do the opposite. This is the story of the father, the husband, who is trying to create a better future for his family with the only thing he has; faith. So when he hears the advice to have faith and that God will provide and decides to follow through (literally) against all odds (he lays down at home, stops working, and does nothing for days, waiting for God to provide), he becomes rich. What is seen here, is not luck, but the reward of the God-fearing man, who deserves a better life because of his character. In other words, those with the correct morals and great character deserve and will strive by the will of God (even doing nothing) and will be able to change their social status.

The second plot of the riddles is an example of a clever-girl story, where the girl is getting into a higher social status marriage that she earns by her (God-given) finesse. The damsel is not only becoming the main character of the plot but is slowly but surely turning into the security of her family's future. However the father and the daughter are acting together throughout the plot, and the solution is all along with the daughter, the father becomes more of a spectator, although without the right moral compass, (the father of the family), the daughter would never have the capacity that is necessary to solve all the riddles. This plot is the preparation for the next one, where the actual

conflict is taking place. The second plot is a mere bridge, a preparatory section between plots one and three, that serves the purpose of reasoning why and how the king is becoming truly interested in the daughter of the poor man.

The assets (belief and luck) are accumulated and were proven to be sufficient to draw the (negative) attention of the character that is in this case representing power. In the next plot, it is clear though, that for true transformation, one's faith and luck are not enough, but true skills and merits are also needed.

Only these three components, true faith, divine providence, and bold merit will end in astounding results. The second plot closed with the daughter solving three riddles, which earns her a high-status marriage (and saves her father's head), changing social class and securing her family's future. The poor, powerless trust the higher power - God - that gains them a fortune. The change draws unwanted attention and the man is tested for his finesse and character, which his daughter helps him pass. No wonder, this unwanted attention from the king is a true question of life and death, as the king's riddles serve the purpose of understanding if the wood-cutter and his family are the people of finesse and merit or if they gained their fortune in questionable ways which would make him a threat to the king. If they fail, the family could lose everything, the father his head, the daughter and the wife all their property, and means of living, and societal approval. The daughter and her family's reward for their success though is acceptance in a higher social class, which is for the benefit of both actors. The king is gaining great support, security against threats, and maintaining good relations, while the girl and the family have their future secured socially and financially. In this sequence of events, having faith results in having money, having money results in having an opportunity, which is not entirely enough, one's merits are absolutely necessary for completing the story, while the opposition of

powerful-resourceful-born in and powerless-resourceless-merit-based achievements are slowly unveiled.

The third plot is the plot of catharsis and solution. It starts with a seemingly impossible task that the daughter, now queen flawlessly solves. The phenomenon of giving impossible tasks or riddles to women to prove that they are worthy wife is not at all uncommon in folktales. What makes it so fascinating is the particular context and environment the plot is placed in. Many interesting past (and surviving) habits of Arabs are described in this story. One of them is the custom of temporary marriage (which is considered 'haram' and unacceptable by the Sunni Muslims, but it's still widely practised by the Shia'.) *'Ali b. AbiTalib reported that the Messenger of Allah prohibited on the Day of Khaibar the contracting of temporary marriage with women and the eating of the flesh of domestic asses.* (Sahih Muslim 1407a, Sahih Muslim Book of Marriage Hadith 3263).

Temporary marriages are made for a certain amount of time, most of the time for money, and although entering into such an agreement is proving that the king is indeed also fallible, so within this context, the girl is not only setting up a clever trap for the king, fabricating a weapon as *Mut'ah*, (or temporary marriage) is forbidden, she also made sure that no laws are broken; Although she disguised herself, they have only consummated a marriage that was already valid, therefore neither the temporary marriage nor consummating it meant any threat to the king's reputation or her honour. In the same move, she solved the second task, of covering the king's mare with the stallion that the king had taken with him, which is the emphasis of the first task. „*Across the folklore of virtually all cultures, the figure of the trickster stands out as a convergence of deception, disguise, and verbal ambiguity.*” (Slyomovics, 1999, 55).

The line between the figure of the trickster and figures that are utilising tools of deception for a

legit purpose or to restore order in their lives is very fine. In this case however, although we are talking about trickery and disguise, no laws - other than cross-dressing - have been violated by the young woman, and her motifs were honest, she was faced with an impossible task that could be solved only by the use of equally twisted means. The main character remained true to her father's faith which gained her family the opportunity to thrive, she has always continued to be lawful, and the king, in the end, was awed by her crafty tricks. The solution to the conflict is when the king finally breaks down and accepts the fact that the family gained their wealth through faith and merits, and therefore he truly accepts his wife in his court. The family went through three stages, and for the solution of each, different characteristics were necessary. The first phase needed true faith. The second one needed intellect, and the third one needed the combination of intellect, disguise, and trickery, which resulted in acceptance, and approval.

In this story of three plots, the clever girl has solved many complex tasks, proving her capacity and worthiness of being the wife of a king, and a queen. Within the given context, the girl must prove that she is able to outsmart the king. From the riddles through tasks, this plot, other than the king's search for proof of the family's true character, is the competition of minds and tricks at an overwhelming measure and intensity. It is thus a logical assumption that the criteria for rising from being a commoner to a queen are exhibiting extraordinary traits and behaviours, which in this case is deception and/or disguise, which is a returning motive in world and Arabic literature. Disguise used to be life-saving for the Arab tribes of the desert centuries ago. We do not need to look back in history that long though, it is enough to bring up Gyula Germanus' travel to Mecca in the early 1930-s (Mestyán, 2017). A king is an extraordinary man, who needs an extraordinary wife, as a

support, as his advisor, capable of developing solutions to complex problems alone.

Briefly, the described sequence of plots is entwined into a fantastically complex and lengthy narrative in the book of Dickson, which provided a glimpse into everyday life and the rules of it of everyday folks. From the stories, some obvious aspects of power dynamics within the wider Arabic and Kuwaiti society are revealed, and we can gain some understanding of the significance of their marriage system and social status. The story of the amorous fidawi is an example of the absolute role of morals, Ras al Dhīb is the story of power, Nesóp is teaching us about the limits of goodwill, and Captain Shakespeare provides a valuable lesson about respect. All of these narrations hold invaluable moral for the local community whether they keep their stories alive. As the tales that are kept alive through oral traditions are so scarce in the geographic area, and because they are given so little importance since the invasion, it is important to “dig up” as many of these stories as possible. The old generation, as the young (interviewed) Kuwaitis referred to them, still remember these. Also, it is important to translate the books that were published only in Arabic, to let the wider audience peek into this incredible heritage Kuwaiti stories have in store for us. The above narrations are certainly only a fragment of a country’s extremely rich heritage, which this article attempted to explain and reveal to the reader.

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